

**JOHANNES L VAN DER WALT**

## **THREE WAYS OF LOOKING AT THE PHENOMENON *EDUCATION SYSTEM***

### **Abstract**

One of the questions that intrigue philosophers of science is how to approach the phenomenon *education system*. Does one, as an education system expert, approach the phenomenon from a preconceived rationalistic idea of what such a system should entail and consist of, or should one's orientation rather be that education systems develop haphazardly as circumstances dictate and that one can at most only describe post hoc what has been constructed as far as the different structures are concerned? Or is there a third possibility that enables the education systems expert to steer through between these two extremes as far as understanding the phenomenon *education system* is concerned? The central thrust of this paper is to argue for the third alternative. The following steps will be followed for the purpose of explicating the thesis of this paper. The first section contains a brief depiction of foundationalism, in terms of which the phenomenon *education system* is approached on the basis of certain preconceived rationalistic ideas. That is followed by a section in which a post-foundationalist orientation to the same problem is outlined. The section thereafter contains a discussion of the post-post-foundationalist orientation that is regarded as probably the most acceptable approach to education system studies in the current postmodern conditions. The implications of each orientation are discussed as the argument unfolds.

### **The need to reflect about our approach to the study of education systems**

One of the questions that intrigue philosophers of science is what our epistemic orientation should be when we study the phenomenon ("the") *education system*. Does one, as an education system expert, approach the phenomenon from a preconceived rationalistic idea of what such a system should entail, or should one's orientation rather be that education systems develop haphazardly as circumstances dictate and that one can at most only describe post hoc what has been constructed as far as the different structures are concerned? Or is there a third possibility that enables the education systems expert to steer through between these two extremes as far as understanding the phenomenon *education system* is concerned? The central thrust of this paper is to argue in favour of the third possibility.

The next section of this paper contains a brief depiction of foundationalism as the first possibility. That is followed by a discussion of the post-foundationalist possibility. The final section discusses the post-post-foundationalist orientation that is arguably the most acceptable approach to education system studies in the current postmodern conditions. The implications of each orientation are discussed as the argument unfolds.

### The foundationalist approach to the study of “the” education system

Foundationalism is typical of the Enlightenment project: its proponents suppose that human reason can attain certain knowledge based on self-evident foundational experiences or a priori propositions from which necessary and universal conclusions could be reached. Absolutism guides the definition of Reason. In some cases, foundationalists see scientific language as attempting to re-present a meta-narrative System (with a capital “S”) that corresponds precisely to reality, while others settle for a local-narrative system (with a lower case “s”) that is merely internally coherent (Schults, 1999: 2). According to Rorty (2004: 53), in the foundationalist frame, thinkers are conscious of the principles that underlie the moral character of their teachings, of the normative resources that reinforce their ideological stances and of the intellectual and cultural assumptions of modernity. Foundationalists endorse “the old Platonic argument to the effect that if there is nothing ‘out there’ (the Platonic forms, the will of God, natural law) that makes our moral judgments true, there is no point in forming such judgments at all”. Foundationalists seem to argue that there must be an ideal or “Platonic blueprint” for every phenomenon that we encounter in real life, including the education system.

According to Lee (2007: 159-161), foundationalism maintains that there is a single directional justification and that foundational beliefs justify the derived beliefs, and not vice versa. Traditional foundational philosophy assumes that common ground in the sense of “being rational” exists, and that an epistemology can be constructed on that common ground. Therefore, in foundationalist thinking, “to suggest that there is no such common ground seems to endanger rationality” (Rorty, 1979: 316-317).

What are the **implications** for education systems studies of this orientation? An education systems scholar with foundationalist leanings would conceivably think along the following lines. She will first of all search for some or other theoretically pre-existent overarching and rationally worked out education system in terms of which she could approach, analyse, understand and explain any particular education system. She will probably regard the unique system under scrutiny as an exemplar or copy of the ideal or “Platonic” notion of “education system” that she has preconceived about what an education system ideally should be. She might attempt to explain every detail of the particular and unique system under investigation on the basis of the overarching foundational narrative or system that she has in mind, have set ideas about how the processes within that system have to unfold to be regarded as effective (among others based on a similar overarching teaching and learning theory); she might attempt to describe the system under investigation in great detail as part of the preconceived education system that she has in the back of her mind, will advise the various actors in the actual education system to manage the processes therein strictly according to the preconceived foundational plan, will have contingency plans ready if the actual system did not comply in all respects with the foundational (ideal) plan (she will advise the actual system to reform in order to comply with the ideal plan), and will measure the outcomes of the education system under scrutiny against the expected outcomes as presaged in the overarching design.

### The post-foundationalist approach to teaching and learning

According to Hiestand (2005: no page number), the term “post-foundationalism” might include soft foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism and relativism. In general, says Schults (1999: 3), post-foundationalists argue that we cannot get “behind” or “under” our beliefs to justify them; all we have is the criteria of coherence with other beliefs within our culturally conditioned web. All of these aspects reflect the anti-rationalistic<sup>1</sup>, anti-formalistic and anti-positivistic sentiments of post-foundationalism (Makrides, 2013: 272).

The post-, anti- or non-foundationalist frame has taken leave of (the notion of) fixed and firm foundations in the form of widely accepted norms, principles or values, as are typical of the foundationalist approach. Instead, this approach is multi-layered, plural, and tolerant and allows many, even mutually contradictory standpoints in its ranks. It also has a strong relativising character that rejects notions of exclusivity, absoluteness (in the sense of thinking on the basis of firm and solid norms) (Makrides, 2013: 253). Put differently, it does not depart from any preconceived (rationalistic) ideas about an “ideal” or “blueprint” system. It furthermore not only questions but also rejects the systematic appeal to human reasoning but also relativises a systematic appeal to human reasoning and recognises the contingency and limitations of human discursive (verbal and non-verbal) potential and practices when attempting to gain an understanding of reality (Makrides, 2013: 255, 271, 272).

The post-foundationalist orientation is contrasted with the certainty sought within the modern project, particularly in its positivistic guise. It embodies the belief that reality is more complex and multi-layered than one might initially think, and hence requires a more flexible and open attitude that allows for the existence of even contradictory perspectives about, in this case, how an education system should be structured (Makrides, 2013: 271-272). Post-foundationalism has generally moved away from all-encompassing narratives and absolute claims for capturing and understanding reality in an objective way. Since humans are seen as forming an integral part of reality, intending to understand it not as outside observers but as involved persons, the attainment of final, precise, objective and perennial knowledge about things may be seen as rather illusory, and this undermines the optimism about correct knowledge, the dream of absolute certainty and the making of universal claims about, in this context, “the” education system (Makrides, 2013: 273).

Post-foundationalism in the guise of non- or anti-foundationalism goes even further in asserting that we have *absolutely no* foundational beliefs that are independent of the support of other beliefs; rather, we subsist in a groundless web, attempting merely to maintain coherence in our local praxis. Justifying beliefs is only a matter of determining whether they cohere with the other beliefs in a particular web or context. Relativism often shapes the view of reason. It sees understanding as rooted in particular traditions or contexts, each of which has its own coherence (Schults, 1999: 2, 8). Rorty (1991: 64), one of the exponents of this view, maintains that instead of basing one’s actions on principles, one assumes a

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<sup>1</sup> Makrides uses the term “anti-rational”, which is not correct. Postmodernism can be seen as irrationalistic, in the sense already explained of making reason play “second fiddle” to a more basic purpose.

pragmatic stance, based on common sense, instinct, intuition, the force / power of argument (Rorty, 1991: 96, 67), debate with others, consensus-seeking, know-how, pragmatic experimentation and muddling through. We have no deep premises to draw on from which to infer that, for instance, one education system is better or more efficient than another. All we can do is recontextualize various developments in (in casu) education systems studies and portray them as stages in a story of progress (Rorty, 1991: 110). He also avers that we can only come under epistemic rules when we have entered the community where the game governed by those rules is played. To be in a certain conversational situation is the only legitimate context to justify our knowledge. Knowledge, he insists, is justified not through finding a privileged foundation, but by gaining social agreement from a community. Consequently, knowledge can be valid only in a certain society from which its social agreement comes (Rorty, 1979: 187).

What are the **implications** of this approach to scholarship for the education systems expert? An education systems expert with post-foundationalist inclinations would conceivably practise her subject along the following lines. She would firstly have no firm philosophical or normative foundation in the sense of an overarching narrative or system that defines and normatively prescribes what an education system should look like. As a result, she would entertain no fixed principles as a foundation for her views about the education system. She will probably regard the myriad of education systems in the world as a 'market place' of ideas about how systems could be organised and structured, and she will make her own inferences (constructivistically and interpretivistically) about what she has observed and analysed. The label 'patchwork scholarship' could be appropriate for her kind of scholarship (Schreiner, 2005: 12). The results of her scholarship will be multi-layered, loosely related, pluralistic, and she would be tolerant of the views and opinions of her colleagues about the structure of education systems. She will probably have no overarching view about how an education system should manifest; she understands the possibility of contingencies arising, and the limits of reasoning. Her research is done for the purpose of helping her colleagues and her students interpret reality (i.e. the education systems in the world), thereby gaining a better understanding of their own realities and education systems. She places no premium on the mastering of positivistic facts, but rather on *personal interpretation* of what she observes and researches. She allows room for contradiction and incoherence, but seems intent on discovering coherence among her findings. She measures the effectiveness of an education system against norms that are only relatively fixed.

### The third possibility

The non- or anti-foundational approach could mean the end of education (and by extension, of education systems studies) as we know it, Wright (2010: 120-123) contends. Educating along non- or anti-foundational lines could mean the detachment of knowledge from reality. Understanding could be equated with unconstrained imagination about what education systems are or should be like. Knowledge (of education systems, in this case) could be reduced to solipsistic or personal(istic) experience and interpretation. There is a distinct possibility that an education systems expert working on the basis of this orientation might fail to obtain knowledge of reality because s/he might be led to believe that there is no such thing

as objective reality, no actual order of things, and that the notion of “reality” only exists within the conventions and linguistic constructions of all those involved in a particular education system. To do research along these lines, according to Wright (2010: 123), is to fall into the epistemic fallacy of confusing reality with knowledge of reality – it is a fallacy to deny the reality of the universe simply because it is beyond our intellectual powers to fully comprehend it. This conclusion is false; since we are unable to identify and understand the essence of real things does not mean that nothing real exists, that only experiences, conclusions and interpretations exist.

It can be added to this objection of Wright’s that to deny the existence of foundations such as principles, norms and firm worldview suppositions is fallacious. The fallacy of such denial can be illustrated in the thinking of Rorty, where he appeals to the norms and standards of neo-liberalism, social-democracy or a particular community. It is impossible for any person to think and argue without appeal to some or other foundation, whether this foundation is only superficial, as in Rorty’s case, or deep and profound, as in the case of individuals who appeal to life and world view principles and even religious convictions (Lee, 2007: 163-164). Wilber (2000: ix-x, 37) also questions the notion that truth is culturally situated, in other words that there are no transcendental or universal truths. It is wrong-headed, he argues, to claim that no judgments are universally true: to make this universal claim and then simultaneously deny all other claims (Wilber, 2000: 36).

Post-foundationalism has not completely eradicated the need among scholars to hark back to foundations in the form of norms and principles that seem to play a role in the background of a person’s thinking. While Van Huyssteen (2004: 10) on the one hand argues for the abandonment of foundationalist notions of rationality typically rooted in foundationalism and for the quest for secure foundations for the various domains of knowledge, he also rejects all forms of deconstructive postmodernism and the adoption of relativist forms of non-foundationalism or contextualism as reactions against universalist notions of rationality. His post-post-foundationalist stance is clear: over against the objectivism of foundationalism and the extreme relativism of most forms of non-foundationalism, his post-post-foundationalist notion of rationality helps to acknowledge contextuality, the shaping role of tradition and of interpreted experience, while at the same time enabling scholars to reach out beyond their own groups, communities, and cultures, in plausible forms of inter-subjective, cross-contextual, and cross-disciplinary conversations.

Scholars as rational agents are always socially and contextually imbedded. On this view, Van Huyssteen (2004: 11) claims, rationality is alive and well in all the domains of human life. All the many faces of human rationality relate directly to a pre-theoretical reasonableness, a “common-sense rationality” that informs and is present in our everyday goal-directed actions. From these everyday activities in ordinary time we can identify epistemic values like intelligibility, discernment, responsible judgement, and deliberation, which guide us when on an intellectual level we come to responsible theory choice and commitment. It is in the pursuit of these goals and ideals that we become rational persons as we learn the skills of responsible judgement and discernment, and where we articulate the best available reasons we have for making what we believe to be the right choices, those reasons

we have for holding on to certain beliefs (for instance, about the structure of an education system). For this reason we cannot talk abstractly and theoretically about the phenomenon of rationality anymore; it is only as individual human beings, living with other human beings in concrete situations, contexts, and traditions, that we can claim some form of rationality, Van Huyssteen avers. (Note how Van Huyssteen restores the status of *rationality*, thereby avoiding the excesses of *rationalism*, typical of foundationalism.)

He then correctly argues that a person always relates to his or her world through *interpreted* experience only. As such a person has no standing ground, no place for evaluating, judging, and inquiring, apart from that which is provided by some specific tradition or traditions. “In this sense,” he says (Van Huyssteen, 2004: 46, 118), “interpretation is at work as much in the process of scientific discovery as in different forms of knowledge”. We approach everything, including “the” education system, in terms of our interpretation frameworks and our own subtle pre-suppositions and points of departure. (Note how Van Huyssteen restores the status of *interpretation frameworks*, which are relatively firm and lasting, thereby avoiding the *relativism* of post-foundationalism.)

Van Huyssteen is clearly searching for a third epistemic possibility, one that would steer through between foundationalism and post-foundationalism. Olthuis (2012: 1) supports him in saying that in future, worldviews need not be seen, in the first place, as conceptual systems<sup>2</sup> but rather as faith-oriented, sensory expectancy filters operating implicitly and largely beneath our conscious awareness, i.e. somewhere in the background of our consciousness. It is now widely acknowledged that everyone comes outfitted with a wide array of pre-judgements, that everyone has built-in biases, and that all of these built-in convictions et cetera help us to gain our own peculiar perspective<sup>3</sup> on what we experience in life, such as an education system. Wilber (2000: xi-xii) agrees in saying that the post-post-foundationalist orientation will help us to avoid the excesses (particularly the relativity and disjointedness) of post-foundationalism in that it will help us to be more aware of wholes, to weave the pluralistic voices together into tapestries of integral intent. It will help us overcome the fractured worldview that post-foundationalism has brought about. People have come to understand that the only way to overcome the problem of a fractured worldview is to embrace (not foundationally) the notion of a worldview framework (Wilber, 2000: 35). The fact that the “system is sliding” (as the post-foundationalists would argue) does not mean that meaning cannot be established, that truth doesn’t exist, or that contexts won’t hold still long enough to make a simple point (Wilber, 2000: 47).

According to Boeve (2000: 255-256), a post-post-foundationalist approach to life and education would entail recognition of the fact that each one of us possesses a personal and unique worldview in terms of which we approach a phenomenon. Our task in these conditions is to engage with worldviews different from our own, to enter into a dialogue with them. According to a post-post-foundationalist view, dialogue becomes a social calling; people have to understand that they are obliged to deal with worldview differences and discontinuity. The differentness of others’

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<sup>2</sup> Typical of foundationalism.

<sup>3</sup> Interpretatively.

worldviews should not be seen as a threat but rather as opportunities to question and to enrich one's own views.

What are the **implications** of this third approach to the study of education systems? An education systems expert with a post-post-foundationalist orientation will acknowledge that, on the basis of built-in convictions playing a role in the background, she is able to steer through between claims regarding universal and absolute truths and total relativism. This approach will enable her to steer through between foundationalism "with its faith in reason, science and technology as the singular, linear, inexorable and progressive forces for health, knowledge, continual growth and success" on the one hand (Olthuis, 2012: 2), and post-foundationalism's desire to embrace difference and pluralism, on the other. She would understand the need to do research on the basis of a worldview framework, not in a mechanistic-deterministic manner and certainly not slavishly. She will be aware of the existence and force of her fundamental principles, convictions, norms, suppositions and use them as a foundation for her research. She would hold and express reasons for entertaining certain beliefs and be conscious of her convictions working in the background of her scholarship. She will also work with an integrated view of the world, particularly with respect to the place and function of education systems. She will furthermore focus on interpreted experience about education systems. She will work inter-subjectively and contextually (wary of post-foundationalist contextualism, as mentioned). She will follow a goal-directed strategy, again not slavishly or mechanistically.

## Conclusion

An education systems expert should be au fait with the three broad orientations to research on education systems outlined above, and should align his or her approach to the subject with one or more of them. It would probably be wise to follow the third because of its greater epistemological balance.

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Prof. Dr. Johannes L van der Walt  
Faculty of Education Sciences  
North-West University  
Potchefstroom Campus  
South Africa  
hannesv290@gmail.com